

Exaggerated Alarm and Destructive Excursions: Anti-Proliferation Policy and The Case of North Korea

BY JOHN MUELLER

The consequences of nuclear proliferation have been substantially benign: those who have acquired the weapons have “used” them simply to stoke their egos or to deter real or imagined threats. However, alarmed anti-proliferation efforts have proved to be exceedingly costly. History suggests that the best policy for dealing the North Korea’s nuclear weapons program is to stop threatening and, as with the Chinese programme, to do nothing.

In 1950, notes historian John Lewis Gaddis, “no one” among foreign policy decision-makers anticipated “that there would be no World War” over the next half century and that the United States and the USSR, “soon to have tens of thousands of thermonuclear weapons pointed at one another, would agree tacitly never to use any of them.”²¹

However, it could have been reasonably argued at the time that major war was simply not in the cards – that despite the huge differences on many issues, the leading countries of the world would manage to keep themselves from plunging into a



Korean Central News Agency shows ballistic missiles on display at Kim Il Sung Square during a military parade in Pyongyang, April 2017. © STR/AFP/Getty Images

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self-destructive cataclysm like, or even worse than, the one they had just survived. This perspective was not, of course, the only one possible, but there was no definitive way to dismiss it. Thus, as a matter of simple, plain, rational decision-making, this prospect – the one that proved to be true – should have been on the table.

The pattern continues. Just about everyone, including the whole of the foreign policy establishment, has for decades taken it as a central article of faith that the proliferation of nuclear weapons is an overwhelming danger and that all possible measures, including war, must be taken to keep it from happening.

But the consequences of such proliferation that has taken place have been substantially benign: those who have acquired the weapons have “used” them simply to stoke their egos or to deter real or imagined threats. At the same time, however, alarmed efforts to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons have proved to be very costly, leading to the deaths of more people than perished at Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined.

This experience suggests, essentially, that the best policy toward North Korea today would be, essentially, to do nothing.

The Benign Consequences of Nuclear Proliferation

Although the weapons have certainly generated obsession and have greatly affected military

spending, diplomatic posturing, and ingenious theorising, the few countries to which the weapons have proliferated have for the most part found them a notable waste of time, money, effort, and scientific talent. They have quietly kept them in storage and haven't even found much benefit in rattling them from time to time.

Although there are conceivable conditions under which nuclear weapons could serve a deterrent function, it is questionable whether they have yet ever done so. In particular, it is far from clear that nuclear weapons are what kept the Cold War from becoming a hot one. Indeed, each leak from the archives suggests that the Soviet Union never seriously considered any sort of direct military aggression against the United States or Europe. As historian Vojtech Mastny puts it, "The strategy of nuclear deterrence [was] irrelevant to deterring a major war that the enemy did not wish to launch in the first place."²

Moreover, the weapons have not proved to be crucial status – or virility – symbols. How much more status would Japan have if it possessed nuclear weapons? Would anybody pay a great deal more attention to Britain or France if their arsenals held 5,000 nuclear weapons, or would anybody pay much less if they had none? Did China need nuclear weapons to impress the world with its economic growth? Or with its Olympics?

Insofar as most leaders of most countries (even rogue ones) have considered acquiring the weapons, they have come to appreciate several defects: nuclear weapons are dangerous, distasteful, costly, and likely to rile the neighbors. Moreover, as Jacques Hymans has demonstrated, the weapons have also been exceedingly difficult to obtain for administratively dysfunctional countries like Iran.³ In consequence, alarmist predictions about proliferation chains, cascades, dominoes, waves, avalanches, epidemics, and points of no return have proved to be faulty.



It is sometimes said that proliferation has had little consequence because the only countries to possess nuclear weapons have had rational leaders. But nuclear weapons have proliferated to large, important countries run by unchallenged monsters who, at the time they acquired the bombs, were certifiably deranged. Thus, when he got his bomb, the Soviet Union's Stalin had been plotting to "transform nature" by planting lots of trees and was given to wandering around the Kremlin mumbling that he could no longer trust anyone, not even himself.⁴ And when China's Mao got his bomb, he had recently launched an addled campaign to remake his society that created a famine killing tens of millions.⁵

Yet neither country used its nuclear weapons for anything other than deterrence and ego-boosting.

The Destructive Consequences of Anti-proliferation Policy

Although the consequences of nuclear proliferation have proved to be substantially benign, the same cannot be said for those of the nuclear anti-proliferation quest.

The war in Iraq, with deaths that have run well over a hundred thousand, is a key case in point. The war against the fully deterrable and containable Saddam Hussein was a militarised anti-proliferation effort to keep his pathetic regime from developing nuclear and other presumably threatening weapons and to prevent him from palming off some of these to eager and congenial terrorists. However, the devastation of Iraq in the service of limiting proliferation did not begin with the war in 2003. For the previous thirteen years, that country had suffered under economic sanctions visited upon it by both Democratic and Republican administrations that were designed to force Saddam from office (and, effectively, from life since he had no viable sanctuary

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elsewhere) and to keep the country from developing weapons, particularly nuclear ones.

The costly alarmist perspective on atomic proliferation is also evident in policies advocated toward North Korea at various times. In the 1990s the Clinton administration, alarmed by concerns about a North Korean nuclear weapon, moved to impose deep economic sanctions to make the isolated country even poorer (insofar as that was possible). And in the next years, when floods and bad weather exacerbated the economic disaster that had been inflicted upon the country by its rulers, there were efforts to deny the existence of a famine (in which over a million people perished) for fear that a politics free response to a humanitarian disaster would undercut efforts to use food aid to wring diplomatic concessions on the nuclear issue from North Korea.⁶

The Case of North Korea

Since World War II, then, none of the handful of countries with nuclear weapons has “used” them for anything other than ego-stoking and deterrence. North Korea seems highly likely to follow the same approach. The hysteria its nuclear program has inspired, then, is simply not justified.

North Korea sports perhaps the most pathetic, insecure, and contemptible regime in the world, and survival is about the only thing it has proved to be good at. It surely knows that launching a nuclear bomb somewhere against a set of enemies that possess tens of thousands is a pretty terrible idea. This would be the case even if the missile actually manages to complete the trip and even if the warhead actually detonates, neither of which is very likely given the country’s technological prowess: 88 percent of the flight tests of some of its missile have failed (5 to 10 percent is normal).⁷

And North Korea does continually insist that its nuclear program is entirely for “defensive” purposes. Moreover, if its goal were to commit self-destructive mayhem, it has long possessed the capacity to do so. With the artillery it has amassed in its south, it could pulverise much of South Korea, including its capital city, Seoul.⁸

North Korea’s ego-stoking has, of course, already started. And the threat it needs to deter

has not been difficult for it to identify. Since the 1950s, the United States has persistently and unambiguously wanted to take out the regime, and it has, at times, actively schemed to do so.

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Although a quick perusal of the front pages might suggest that Donald Trump has a lock on irresponsible, even infantile, presidential bloviating, the art form has a long history. A prime example, and the one that essentially started the current phase of hysteria over North Korea, occurred shortly after 9/11 when President George W. Bush announced that America’s “responsibility to history” was now to “rid the world of evil” – rather outdoing God who once tried with that flood of His.⁹

Then, a few months later, Bush specified in a major speech that, while evil could presumably be found everywhere, a special “axis of evil” existed, and it lurked, in this order, in North Korea, Iran, and Iraq.¹⁰ As Bush geared up to attack number three in early 2003, North Korea announced that it would be withdrawing from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.



George Bush declared North Korea to be a part of an ‘axis of evil’ along with Iran and Iraq © Getty



North Korea's wariness about negotiating away its nuclear capacity can only have been enhanced by the experience of Libya's dictator, Muammar Qaddafi, who cut a deal with the Americans to do that in 2003.¹¹ When Qaddafi was confronted with an insurrection in 2011, the Obama administration militarily intervened, speeding his downfall and brutal execution.

It is commonly argued that we have to worry because the North Korean regime is exceptionally crazy. However, it is incumbent on those alarmed by North Korea's bomb to demonstrate that the regime is daffier than Stalin's Soviet Union and Mao's China.

When China, impelled, like North Korea, primarily by incessant threats from the United States, began building a bomb, President John Kennedy very seriously considered bombing Chinese nuclear facilities. He was heard to declare that "A Chinese nuclear test is likely to be historically the most significant and worst event of the 1960s."¹²

Instead, the US essentially did nothing. China ended up building far fewer of the bombs than it could have, its foreign and domestic policy eventually mellowed very substantially, and the existence of its arsenal has proved to be of little historical consequence.

And it turned out that "historically the most significant and worst event of the 1960s" stemmed not from China's nukes, but from Kennedy's tragically misguided decision to begin to send American troops in substantial numbers to Vietnam largely to confront the Chinese threat that he came to believe lurked there.

Insofar as nuclear proliferation is a response to perceived threat, it follows that one way to reduce the likelihood such countries would go nuclear is a simple one: stop threatening them. And, more generally, any anti-proliferation priority should

be topped with a somewhat higher one: avoiding militarily aggressive actions under the obsessive sway of worst-case-scenario fantasies, actions that might lead to the deaths of tens – or hundreds – of thousands of people.

Nuclear proliferation, while not particularly desirable, is unlikely to prove to be a major danger, and extreme anti-proliferation policies need careful reconsideration. They can generate costs far higher than those likely to be inflicted by the potential (and often essentially imaginary) problems they seek to address. 



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